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ABSTRACT

A study of American Indian practices and beliefs is useful as a counterpoint to the assumptions of western technological societies. American Indian culture includes a spiritual heritage that integrates both a tribe and individuals with the universe. It emphasizes harmony with all aspects of life and provides a model for redefining the relationships between society and technology. This paper examines American Indian ideas about creation, relationships with all life forms, and harmony with natural forces in contrast to western beliefs of subject and object separation. American Indian concepts of oneness with the earth, which led to difficulties in understanding private land ownership, and ceremonies that portray the unity and awareness of all elements are highlighted. Western civilization faces ecological, social, and technological problems because of a lack of awareness about how various interactions and techniques impact the entire universe. A study of American Indian beliefs can help people view technology from a connected or wholeness perspective, rather than from a position of efficiency, speed, or operational ease. (JHP)

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"ALL THINGS ARE CONNECTED": NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON WHOLENESS AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

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"ALL THINGS ARE CONNECTED": NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON WHOLENESS AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Speaking at the Little Bighorn Council Grounds in 1909, Crow Chief Plenty Coups delivered a nostalgic farewell:

> The antelope have gone; the buffalo wallows are empty. Only the wail of the coyote is heard. The white man's medicine is stronger than ours; his iron horse rushes over the buffalo trail. He talks to us through his "whispering spirit" [the telephone]. We are like birds with a broken wing. My heart is cold within me. My eyes are growing dim--I am old. . . ."[1]

That's generally the way we have left it--white Americans have technology, Indians have nothing. For years native Americans have been telling us that there is more to the story--that their traditional heritage is rich in all those things that seem to be missing in modern western culture. A study of Native American practices is particularly useful as a counterpoint to the assumptions of western technological society. The emphasis on the unity of all things is strikingly similar to major tenets of eastern/oriental philosophy. In the past I have asked my engineering students to look at such things as the I Ching to get a different perspective on technology. Articulating eastern values helps in the recognition of western values--particularly those western values that not only stand in marked contrast to eastern values, but also serve as the underpinings of western technology. There are, however, advantages to looking at Native American beliefs instead of eastern beliefs. Native Americans are, after all, part of our culture, albeit a stifled minority; the Indian is

part of our multiracial composition--what distinguishes us as Americans--and deserves more attention than occasional mention in textbooks or minor parts on Saturday morning television.

The main problem when discussing Native American culture is that it is complex. There were hundreds of tribes speaking as many as a thousand tongues, ranging from sedentary agriculturalists to wandering hunters, from nations of a hundred to those as large as 20,000. There is also a tendency to mix past with present, to forget that traditions have been modified by contacts with other Americans. Worst of all, of course, is the tendency to replace the old stereotype of the Indian--aggressive but noble savage--with one that is equally patronizing--the communal ecologist, the natural democrat. Indian activist and writer Vine Deloria, in fact, notes that white Americans who think they understand Indians often do more harm than good.[3]

Yet, having noted all these things, it should also be noted that some beliefs and traditions do remain--they have proved themselves quite resilient in the face of Anglo-European ideas. North American Indian culture includes a spiritual heritage that integrates the tribe and the individual with the cosmos. The Indian tradition emphasizes harmony with other individuals and, most significantly, with <u>all</u> species of life. This tradition crosses tribal boundaries and has remained strong through centuries of contact with other cultures, perhaps because it is a way of life--a way of seeing. With its sense of sacred balance, traditional North American Indian culture provides a model for those attempting to redefine the relationship between society and

technology. It offers a provocative alternate viewpoint to assess technological impact and counter technological determinism.

I should note that throughout this paper I use the terms Native American and Indian interchangeably. Some Native Americans dislike this practice. Likewise, others, worried about the homogenizing effects of the Pan-Indian movement, believe that you should speak only of specific tribes or tribal practices. I plead guilty to violating that admonition in this paper, mainly because I think that you have to start with an overview to get a basic understanding of ideas that are common to the Native American worldview before looking at tribal distinctions. I also think that the traditional worldview--the ideal that is not always realized by every individual Native American--transcends tribal lines, though explicit expression of it varies from tribe to tribe.

No doubt the best place to start is the beginning--Native American ideas about creation. Generally most tribes agree that some outside force or spirit created human beings; most Indian traditions include reference to springing from the soil. Sioux legend, for example, states that the first man sprang from the soil in the middle of the Great Plains, hundreds and perhaps thousands of years ago. As Chief Luther Standing Bear underscored, "So this land of the great plains is claimed by the Lakotas as their own. We are of the soil and the soil is of us."[4] Most traditions suggest that plants and animals were made before human beings and that human beings could eat or use animal and plant products. A significant difference from western tradition,

however, is the Indian belief that human beings share a spiritual basis with all other forms of life. Indian ceremonies often use animal masks or costumes as symbols of the spirits that give the animals form and life. The symbolic forms are "manifestations of the one supreme creative power which imbues them with meaning."[5] Even more significantly, the supreme creative power is shared by all living creatures, including human beings. Blackfoot legend underscores the power that animals can transfer through dreams:

> At the beginning, the first spirit, the old man, said to the people: "Whatever these animals tell you to do, you must obey them, as they appear to you in your sleep. Be guided by them. If anybody wants help, if you are alone and traveling, and cry aloud for help, your prayer will be answered. It may be by the eagles, perhaps by the buffalo, or by the bears. Whatever animal answers your prayer, you must listen to him.[6]

Sioux Holy Man Black Elk noted that a lamenter in search of a vision should maintain openness to any messenger of the Great Spirit, often in the form of an animal. Calling these animal messengers people, Black Elk asserted that they were important and could "teach us two-leggeds much if we make ourselves humble before them. The most important of all the creatures are the wingeds, for they are nearest to the heavens, and are not bound to the earth as are the four-leggeds, or the little crawling people."[7]

Black Elk explained that Native Americans regarded "all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has a wochangi or influence. . . through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive."[8] In Sioux ceremonies, the holy man prays "O Wakan Tanka, help us all to be always

attentive!" Indian scholar Joseph E. Brown notes that the message "Be attentive!" expresses an idea central to Native Americans--"it implies that in every act, in every thing, and in every instant, the Great Spirit is present, and that one should be continually and intensely 'attentive' to this Divine presence."[9] Contemporary Sioux Medicine Woman Agnes Whistling Elk notes that awareness comes through close examination--learning about the bird by the way it builds its nest.[10] Whistling Elk cautions against the subject/object separation so common in western thought. Rather, the idea is to learn about the animal characters residing in human beings by watching animals in their natural habitats. Again, it comes back to seeking harmony with natural forces as a means of expanding understanding. "White people." says Agnes Whistling Elk, "have this thing that says, 'I'm not a snake. I'm not a squirrel. I'm something important.' They separate, and that's their tragedy."[11]

Cherokee legend asserts that disease originated because human beings failed to live in harmony with other living things--because they separated. According to this legend, all the beasts, birds, fishes, insects, and plants could talk in the old days and they lived in peace and friendship with the people. As time went on, though, human settlements encroached on animals' space. Humans invented tools to help slaughter the larger animals, birds, and fishes; smaller animals were crushed out of carelessness and contempt. To maintain common safety, animals created diseases for the human creatures. The plants, however, remained friendly to human beings, and agreed to furnish remedies or medicines for the

diseases.[12] Most Native American traditions are not so specific with respect to the consequences of disharmony, emphasizing the virtues of harmony instead. Agnes Whistling Elk cautions that "taking the life of a wild and free animal should be done with the understanding of your own death."[13] In other words, awareness of the shared nature of the universe enables a person to see how everything fits together in a universal plan, and, in fact, strengthens the unity.

The Native Americans' oneness with the earth and all its creatures is best seen in their ideas about possession of land. Indians always had difficulty understanding the principle of private ownership of land. The Indian was part of the land as were the rocks and trees and animals and birds. As Dale Van Every notes, the Native American always thought his homeland was holy, the resting place of the spirits of his ancestors. "He conceived its waterfalls and ridges, its clouds and mists, its glens and meadows, to be inhabited by the myriad of spirits with whom he held daily communion."[14] Throughout the nineteenth century, Indian Chiefs reaffirmed this belief. Speaking in 1854, Chief Seattle noted:

> Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. . . . The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.[15]

Chief Too-hul-hul-sote of the Nez Percé noted that chieftainship of the earth could not be sold of given away.[16] His relative, Chief Joseph, said it more eloquently:

> Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully

> with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with as I chose. The one who has the right to dispose of it is the one who has created it. I claim a right to live on my land, and accord you the privilege to live on yours.[17]

Similarly, Sitting Bull affirmed the oneness of the natural world and contrasted this idea with the destructive powers of the western subject/object outlook:

> Every seed is awakened and so has all animal life. It is through this mysterious power that we too have our being and we therefore yield to our neighbors, even our animal neighbors, the same right as ourselves, to inhabit this land. . . . Yet, hear me, people, we have now to deal with another race--small and feeble when our fathers first met them but now great and overbearing. Strangely enough they have a mind to till the soil and the love of possession is a disease with them.[18]

Vine Deloria caustically notes that "the living, undefined religion" of Native Americans "where man is a comfortable part of his world" should be contrasted "with the message brought by the Christian missionary."[19]

Native American beliefs about the unity of all things are perhaps best seen in ceremonies, which are not worship so much as they are renewals of the relationship between human beings and the supernatural. Ceremonies are a way of keeping in tune with the universe--prescribed motions and symbolic acts must be exactly performed.[20] The circle, a holy form, plays a significant role in all ceremonies. Symbolic of the unity of the tribe, the circle also represents all power contained in the universe. It occurs most frequently in the base of the tipi, the camp circle, medicine hoops, round drums, medicine shields, and the bowl of the sacred pipe.[21] Joseph Epes Brown describes the process of filling the

circle of the pipe:

> In filling a pipe, all space (represented by the offering to the powers of the six directions) and all things (represented by the grains of tobacco) are contracted within a single point (the bowl or heart of the pipe), so that the pipe contains, or really is, the universe. But since the pipe is the universe, it is also man, and the one who fills a pipe should identify himself with it, thus not only establishing the center of the universe, but also his own center; he so "expands" that the six directions of space are actually brought within himself. It is by this "expansion" that a man ceases to be a part, a fragment, and becomes whole or holy; he shatters the illusion of separateness."[22]

Ceremonies traditionally involve the circle created by the four cardinal directions (west, north, east, and south). In the Sioux ceremony known as "Crying for a Vision," purified earth is spread around a central hole and a holy man marks four places/directions around the hole. This is all very sacred since it establishes the four great powers of the universe and the center, which is the dwelling place of the Great Spirit.[23] Many of the ceremonies involve walking through the four directions to reestablish unity.

The Sun Dance is a good example of the use of the circle in the symbolic re-creation of the universe. Traditionally the Sun Dance is held "when the grass has reached its full growth and vegetation is in full leaf"--the definite end of winter.[24] Most tribes currently observe the Sun Dance on the Fourth of July, usually every other year. To construct the Sun Dance Lodge, a holy tree (cottonwood) is cut for the center pole. 28 upright forked sticks are arranged in a circle around the center pole, and 28 poles go from the tops (forks) of the sticks to the center. In

this symbolic creation of the universe, each post represents a particular object of creation; the center tree represents the Great Spirit, the center of everything. There are also many other reasons for the number 28, including the days of the moon and the sacred nature of the factors four and seven.[25] In the dance itself, participants become purified by undergoing some form of self-torture. At the same time, the real object of the dance is to represent symbolically human beings' position and role in the universe, to bring enlightenment and awareness. The Sun Dance Lodge is the universe.

The form of the Sun Dance Lodge is the same as that of the Medicine Wheel. Medicine Wheels, actually circles of stones marking major cosmic events, are still found on the Great Plains today. Divided into 28 segments, the medicine wheel served as a solar observatory of sorts. Through determinations of the angles of planets and stars with respect to the earth, Indians calculated such things as seasons, months, and days. Thus, the Medicine Wheel was the basis of the Plains Indians' calendar. Beyond its cosmic function, the Medicine Wheel had and still has an important psychological function. It helps to integrate the individual into the tribe and the world at large.[26] According to tribal lore, at birth each person begins at one of the Great Directions on the wheel--each direction has its characteristic attribute, animal reflection, and color.[27] There is no advantage or disadvantage accorded to a person by virtue of his/her birth at a particular point on the circle--the circle insures that there is diversity within unity.

A person, usually with the aid of an older, wiser tribal member, searches for his/her starting position (often through four days of solitude known as a Vision Quest) and then successively learns to recognize the other powers of the wheel.[28] True awareness involves observing and then imitating the qualities of those who possess the other three dominant traits. Often the learning process involves the creation of personal shields, one for each direction.[29] Plains culture, in particular, encourages each member of a tribe to cultivate the three undeveloped traits, integrating all four traits, to grow into a balanced person. The circle thus becomes a mirror, reflecting back understanding to all who take its teachings seriously.[30]

Individuals seeking to balance themselves in a medicine way, according to the Medicine Wheel, aim for medicine power--the power to bring harmony and balance into their lives and the lives of others. According to Agnes Whistling Elk, when this is achieved, "you begin to see magical glimpses because you are telling the beings of the earth that you believe in beauty."[31] Whistling Elk also notes that "Power is strength and the ability to see yourself through your own eyes and not through the eyes of another. It is being able to place a circle of power at your own feet and not take power from someone else's circle. True power is love."[32]

Traditionally, the Medicine Wheel reminded Plains Indians that the universe included many other creatures and tribes. They believed, for example, that the Great Spirit taught through particular paths represented by twelve shields. The Teaching of the Shields established that American Indians possessed only two

of the twelve shields. The rest of humanity possessed the other ten shields or ways to the center. Thus, ultimately, the Medicine Wheel taught harmony, not merely within the tribe, but within all the universe.[33]

In Indian Country Peter Matthiesson notes that there is no word for religion in Indian languages because religion is life itself. Matthiesson continues:

> The whole universe is sacred, man is the whole universe; the religious ceremony is life itself, the miraculous common acts of every day. Respect for nature is reverence for the Creator, and it is also self-respecting, since man and nature, though not the same thing, are not different. Plants and animals that must be used are thanked with ceremony.[34]

This, of course, brings us back to where I started--the significance of the Native American worldview or way of life for modern technological society. Is there something to be gained from this alternate viewpoint, however idealistic it may be?

Most definitely, I would say yes. That is not to say that we should eliminate modern technology and go back to the earth. The exposure to Native American views offers a counterpoint. In Indian tradition a harmonious relationship with the natural world is precious, even sacred; awareness is the key to understanding the nature of the harmonious relationship. Most of our significant problems with technology are a consequence of a notable lack of this sort of awareness. We envision a technique and might even speculate about its possible impacts, but often we do not think enough about the destabilizing effects on the entire universe. What does this change mean in the context of wholeness? We use plastic bags and do not think about the

ecological changes consequent to their making or use unless these changes begin to affect us. For years we have heated homes, powered factories, and driven cars without a lot of fear about the greenhouse effect or disturbances in the ozone layer, until we see that changes might affect us. Every year we dump three times as much garbage into our oceans as we take out in fish; we will not panic about this situation until it affects us. In other words, we separate ourselves from the other creatures and plants of the natural world; we objectify the problems and do not see that the destruction of other living things destroys us <u>even in the act of destruction</u>--long before the tangible signs of effects on us or our environment. In our Judeo-Christian tradition we have tended to take Genesis 1:28 to heart and have insisted that it is our right to subdue and have dominion over the natural world. We have forgotten that dominion also entails stewardship. Perhaps dominion is the wrong approach anyway.

Native American ideas about the natural world certainly do not give a blueprint for technology or life in technological society. They do, however, insist, as Chief Seattle put it in 1855, that "All things are connected; whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth."[35] A study of Native American beliefs makes us think about what "connection" means. This alternate viewpoint might, in fact, force us to look at technology from a different perspective--to value wholeness rather than efficiency or speed or ease. It might inspire us to ask questions about technology and society--to expect different things from technology and society--that we might not have previously

considered. If our culture is to last, our society must learn to live in harmony with the universe. We must move away from rationalizations or fears based on ideas about technological determinism, especially when these ideas discount the ultimate value of wholeness. The Native American worldview insists that we have a duty to develop awareness, to structure and control the organization of technology so that it reaffirms rather than destroys the connection of all living things.

NOTES

1. Frederick W. Turner III, The Portable North American Indian Reader (New York: Viking Press, 1974; reprint ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 256.

2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. See Vine Deloria, Jr., Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto (New York: Avon Books, 1969), pp. 9-34.

4. Chief Luther Standing Bear, Land of the Spotted Eagle (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933), quoted in Turner, The Portable North American Indian Reader, p. 126.

5. Frank Waters, Book of the Hopi (New York: The Viking Press, 1963; reprint ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 125.

6. George B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), quoted in Turner, The Portable North American Indian Reader, p. 162.

7. John Epes Brown, ed., The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953; reprint ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 58.

8. Ibid., p. 59.

9. Ibid, note, p. 64.

10. Lynn V. Andrews, Medicine Woman (San Francisco and others: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 126.

11. Ibid., p. 107.

12. James Mooney, Myths of the Cherokee, 19th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-98, Part I (Washington, 1900), quoted in Turner, The Portable North American Indian Reader, pp.90, 92-93.

13. Andrews, Medicine Woman, p. 131.

14. Dale Van Every, Disinherited: The Lost Birthright of the American Indian (New York: Avon Books, 1966), p. 18.

15. Turner, The Portable North American Indian Reader, p. 253.

16. Ibid., p. 232. For similar Hopi beliefs, see Waters, Book of the Hopi, p. 323.

17. Quoted in Dee Brown, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (Toronto,

London, and New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 300.

18. Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, To Serve the Devil, Vol. 1, Natives and Sons (New York: Random House, 1971), quoted in Turner, The Portable North American Indian Reader, p. 255.

19. Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, p. 107.

20. Cecil Corbett, "The Voice of Creation is the Melody of God," Presbyterian Survey (November 1985), p. 24; E. Adamson Hoebel, The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains (New York & others: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978), p. 90.

21. John G. Neihard, Black Elk Speaks (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 198, quoted in Bernd Peyer, Hyemeyohsts Storm's Seven Arrows: Fiction and Anthropology in the Native American Novel (Wiesbaden, West Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH), p. 58.

22. Brown, The Sacred Pipe, note, p. 21.

23. Ibid., p. 49.

24. Peyer, Hyemeyohsts Storm's Seven Arrows, p. 79.

25. Brown, The Sacred Pipe, p. 80.

26. Lars Charles Mazzola, "The Medicine Wheel: Center and Periphery," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association (March 1987, Montreal, Canada), pp. 2-3.

27. Hyemeyohsts Storm, Seven Arrows (New York & others: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 7.

28. Peyer, Hyemeyohsts Storm's Seven Arrows, p. 74; Storm, Seven Arrows, p. 5.

29. Ibid., p. 9; Lynn V. Andrews, Flight of the Seventh Moon: The Teaching of the Shields (San Francisco & others: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 61-62, 67-69.

30. Storm, Seven Arrows, p. 14.

31. Andrews, Flight of the Seventh Moon, p. 83.

32. Ibid, p. 130.

33. Mazzola, "The Medicine Wheel," p. 5.

34. Quoted in Corbett, "The Voice of Creation," p. 24.

35. Quoted in Mazzola, "The Medicine Wheel," p. 1.